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Livestock and Products

Bovine Brucellosis Outbreak in Great Britain

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Report Highlights:

On February 20, 2003 two cases of bovine brucellosis were confirmed in a Scottish beef herd. The cases were found in imported animals from the Republic of Ireland. This is the first case of the disease to be identified on the United Kingdom mainland since an October 1993 outbreak linked to imports of cattle from France.

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On February 20, 2003 two cases of bovine brucellosis were confirmed in a Scottish beef herd. The cases were found in imported animals from the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This is the first case of the disease to be identified on the United Kingdom mainland (Great Britain) since an October 1993 outbreak linked to imports of cattle from France.

According to the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Scottish Executive, the outbreak of bovine brucellosis was confirmed following the abortion of a fetus on a mixed beef and sheep farm in the Forfar area of Angus, Scotland. The herd had already been under movement restrictions following notification at the end of December 2002 that there had been a brucellosis breakdown in the herd of origin in the ROI. A total of thirty six (36) heifers born in early 2000 are understood to have been exported to Scotland from this origin herd in Roscommon, ROI in May and June of 2002. In accordance with current surveillance procedures in Great Britain, the animals were apparently all routine blood tested on arrival and at sixty (60) days post-import. The animals all tested negative for brucellosis between July and September of 2002. All the animals have been traced to five (5) farms in Scotland where they and their close contacts have been placed under movement restrictions and kept isolated from other cattle in their respective herds. According to veterinary advice in Great Britain, all of the imported animals will be culled. Also, further testing and surveillance of cattle are understood to be continuing to ensure that the outbreak has been eradicated.

In a separate development but in the light of the brucellosis cases in Scotland, Defra has announced that three (3) beef animals imported into England from Northern Ireland from a herd which has subsequently had bovine brucellosis are to be culled. These animals were among five (5) imported into Great Britain last September. The affected animals and their close contacts were placed under movement restrictions by Defra following a brucellosis breakdown in the exporting herd in Northern Ireland. According to Defra, four (4) of the animals, one (1) of which died earlier this year of an indeterminate cause, were imported to a farm near Middlesbrough and the remaining animal went to a holding in Scotland. According to veterinary advice in Great Britain, this animal will also be culled.

Brucella abortus is a zoonotic disease causing abortion in cattle and a variety of clinical syndromes in man. Bovine brucellosis is a bacterial infection which can cause recurrent or chronic fever in humans. Human infection follows the ingestion of contaminated unpasteurized dairy products or following direct contact with infected material. The main risk is therefore to those in direct contact with livestock. It is a known occupational hazard for farm workers and veterinarians. Person to person transmission is rare. There is no risk from pasteurized milk, cooked meat or contact with pasteurized animal products. In any event, the farm with confirmed cases of bovine brucellosis does not sell milk, thereby limiting the human risk to those who had direct contact with the aborted animal.

All cattle herds in Great Britain are subject to routine surveillance for brucellosis. Beef herds are blood sampled every two years. Dairy cattle are monitored through regular milk testing.

Bovine brucellosis of cattle is present in many countries including the ROI and several other EU countries. EC Directive 64/432/EEC provides for control measures in the country of export to prevent the export of brucellosis infected animals. Defra reports that the breakdown in Scotland has been reported to the veterinary authorities in the ROI and the European Commission.